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RESURGENT RUSSIA AND AMERICA'S VITAL INTERESTS:  
RE-THINKING US POLICY IN EUROPE

by

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## *Abstract*

This research paper addresses the relevance of Russia's resurgence as an economic, political and military actor on the world scene focusing on the implications for current US policy and objectives. It considers the changing nature of the threat to Europe and questions, not only the appropriate role for NATO in response to that threat, but the course of action the US should pursue with regard to NATO and in light of US national security interests in Europe. The paper considers the following: 1). Russia's post-Cold War decline as well as its impressive recovery over the past decade. Focusing on Russia's growing economic and regional clout, rising nationalism, increasing great power rhetoric and return to autocratic policies, the paper looks at the decline in US – Russian relations during the second term of Russian president Vladimir Putin and questions the appropriate balance the US should strike between conciliation and defending its own strategic objectives, 2). The effects of numerous issues on US – Russian relations to include: the changing role of NATO and its eastward expansion, disagreement on ethnic break-away regions to include Kosovo in Serbia and South Ossetia in Georgia, Iranian nuclear ambitions, and the US Anti-Ballistic Missile proposal for Eastern Europe, 3). A recommendation for strategic-level policy to which the US should adhere concerning its role with NATO and its need for balance on issues within Russia's geo-political sphere of influence.

## **Biography**

Col Brian D. Johnson was commissioned in 1987 through the Air Force Academy where he received a Bachelor of Science degree in history with a minor in Russian language. Upon completing the Intelligence Officer Training Course at Goodfellow AFB TX, he was assigned as the Squadron Intelligence Officer to the 94<sup>th</sup> Tactical Fighter Squadron and Tactics Officer to the 1<sup>st</sup> Tactical Fighter Wing, Langley AFB VA from 1987 to 1991. He deployed to Saudi Arabia with the First Wing during Operation DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM and upon his return from Dhahran AB KSA, he served as Command Staff Briefing Officer to the Commander, Tactical Air Command. From 1992 to 1995, Col Johnson served as a unit level intelligence flight commander within Air Force Special Operations Command. In 1995 he moved to US Air Forces in Europe, Ramstein AB Germany where he was Chief of Unit Automation and Executive Officer to the Director of Intelligence. Following USAFE, Col Johnson was assigned to Central Command Air Forces at Shaw AFB SC where he was the Chief of Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance programs and systems. In 2001, Col Johnson became the Director of Operations for the 30<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Squadron, Distributed Ground Station – One, Langley AFB VA. In 2002, he became Director of Operations for the 480<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Wing. He commanded the 13<sup>th</sup> Intelligence Squadron, Distributed Ground Station – Two, Beale AFB CA from 2004 to 2006. Prior to attending Air War College his most recent assignment was to Headquarters US Air Force at the Pentagon as Chief of Intelligence Force Management. Col Johnson's deployments include Operations DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM, NORTHERN WATCH, and IRAQI FREEDOM. He is married to the former Meganne McCawley of Wellesley, Massachusetts. They have two daughters, Devan and Hailey.

# INTRODUCTION

With its commitment to membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) following WWII, the United States solidified its dominant role in Western Europe and inherited a significant obligation to the largest collective security agreement in history. For more than forty years, NATO served as a symbol of European unity in its pledge to defend the collective interests of its members against any and all external threats. Almost immediately, that threat solidified in the form of the Soviet Union and the Warsaw Pact. The Cold War that developed into a pitched ideological battle between East and West became NATO's most important, nearly singular reason for existence. In light of the ultimate success of the US and NATO in defeating the threat and vanquishing the enemy into relative insignificance it would have been logical to witness diminishing US influence in Europe as well as a decreasing role for NATO if not its complete dissolution.

On the contrary, the past decade has seen an increasingly vital role for the United States particularly in Eastern Europe while NATO solidified its organization and considerably increased its membership to include numerous former Soviet states and Warsaw Pact countries. Poland, the Czech Republic and Hungary were formally admitted into NATO 1999 and seven additional nations, including the Baltic States, became members during a second round of enlargement in 2004. Rather than disband due to a loss of mission, the NATO charter has transformed becoming increasingly focused on the exportation of democratic ideals on the premise that membership in the alliance promotes stability and security for all Europeans.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *DW-World.DE Deutsche Welle*, "NATO Expansion: A Model for Stability or a Grab for Power?" 23 March 2008, <http://www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,2144,3283800.html>.

Critics have argued that it is merely NATO's self preservation as a bureaucracy that has driven its evolution and that expansion represents a desperate attempt to devise new missions for an alliance that is outdated and adrift. US congressional representative Ron Paul has called for the US to withdraw its support for NATO completely and for NATO itself to disband. Citing NATO expansion as a cover for increased US intervention in Eastern Europe, Paul expressed concern over provoking Russia and suffering negative consequences in the future.<sup>2</sup> Other analysts agree suggesting NATO represents merely another means for the US to project its hard power globally and further an explicitly Washington agenda of regional dominance. In recent years Russia has taken an increasingly hard line stance on the issue of NATO enlargement into its historical sphere of influence. Former Russian president Vladimir Putin has challenged NATO's newly stated role as a democratizer stating "the appearance of a powerful military bloc on our borders will be taken by Russia as a direct threat to the security of our country."<sup>3</sup>

The argument for restraint in US and NATO political and military eastward growth is quite logical. Russia remains a nation of vast military, economic, and political power. A regional power if not yet again a global power, it would be short sighted for the West to continue to bully and alienate Russia. However, calls to disband NATO altogether are equally short sighted and do not appropriately account for existing and evolving threats to European security. Whether those threats arise along historic geo-political lines or come in the form of internal ethnic strife or radical ideologies, dissolving the structure to counter those threats would be ill-advised. In light of Representative Paul's concerns over aggravating a powerful Russia, it would be equally counterintuitive to disband any concerted efforts for collective security as a hedge

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<sup>2</sup> Representative Ron Paul, "Against NATO Expansion," congressional testimony in the House of Representatives, 30 March 2004, <http://www.lewrockwell.com/paul/paul171.html>.

<sup>3</sup> *DW-World.DE Deutsche Welle*, "NATO Expansion."

against that powerful threat. However, the question remains what should the US policy be with regard to Russia and NATO? Is NATO to be considered the security arm of the European Union? Has the threat changed so considerably that NATO's role is now that of forcing conformity to western norms in order to ensure inclusion in an elite group?

## **POST-SOVIET ERA THREAT**

Without a doubt, Russia in the twenty first century does not carry the same level of importance for US foreign policy as did the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The fragmentation of the USSR and subsequent partitioning of former Soviet hegemony in Eastern Europe and former Soviet republics decreased Russia's relevance on the world stage to near zero. With its steady decline economically, militarily, and politically, Russia lost its ability to project power and influence international affairs, even regionally. However, even before Russia's twenty first century economic and political resurgence, many analysts warned against discounting the importance of Russia's domestic developments and regional activities. Their main argument: as a permanent member of the UN Security Council and the second largest nuclear power in the world, marginalizing Russia would be short-sighted. Nonetheless, this is exactly how many US and Western European policies played out in the early post-Cold War era.

Today, in light of renewed economic growth and vast natural resources, Russia is emerging as a world economic power and with that increasing its contention for political might. Now a member of the G-8 with a steadily growing Gross Domestic Product, sound fiscal policies, a solid budget surplus, and as a major oil and natural gas producer and supplier, Russia appears poised to take a central role (economically if not politically) on the world stage. What,

then, are the implications of a resurgent Russia for US vital national interests and what should be the US policy relative to its relationship with NATO and the former Soviet Union?

## **THE RUSSIAN DEMISE OF THE 1990S**

The post-Cold War era ushered in a dramatic shift in the global balance of power. The former Soviet Union, defeated, bankrupt, and disheartened, retreated within its borders and fragmented into fifteen separate states. Moscow relinquished control over the Eastern Block and ceded all of its post-WWII territorial gains granting independence to the former republics which constituted the USSR. Russia remained willing but incapable of projecting power and exerting its influence on the global scene. Instead, the early 1990's saw a Russia focused almost exclusively on domestic affairs. Under a corrupt system of oligarchs, free market capitalism struggled to take root, creating wealth for relatively few Russians. President Boris Yeltsin's period of democratic reforms was accompanied by skyrocketing unemployment and, by the late 1990's, a deep economic depression that surpassed even the world economic crises of the 1930s.

Vacillating and ineffective, Yeltsin's foreign policy became completely secondary to domestic concerns. Heavily reliant on international donors, principally the United States and Western Europe<sup>4</sup>, Russia's foreign policy agenda was dominated by consideration of relationships to financial benefactors resulting in the absence of a Russian presence on many international issues. Subordination of foreign affairs even became de-facto policy when

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<sup>4</sup> After the Soviet Union's collapse, the United States sought a cooperative relationship with Moscow and supplied over \$14 billion to encourage democracy and market reform, for humanitarian aid, and for WMD threat reduction in Russia.

Yeltsin's foreign minister, Andrey Kozyrev publically stated in a 1992 *Foreign Affairs* article Russia's foreign policy would be secondary to the task of political and economic reforms.<sup>5</sup>

Benefitting from a new found asymmetric freedom to pursue foreign policy objectives independent from Moscow's concerns, the West did not hesitate to press its advantage.

Manifesting itself in NATO expansion into Eastern Europe, military intervention in the Balkans, and active economic and security engagement with former Soviet countries<sup>6</sup>, US and Western European unilateral actions suggested Russia could be treated like post-WWII Germany or Japan. The West's biggest mistake, according to Yuliya Tymoshenko in a 2007 *Foreign Affairs* article:

[Was] assuming that Russia's reduced status meant it was unnecessary to accord the Kremlin any special diplomatic consideration – that Russia neither deserved nor should be afforded a major role in world affairs.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, many scholars agree the greatest failure immediately following the Cold War was the US attempt to leverage as much as possible politically, economically, and in security terms from the former Soviet Union while Russia struggled through its recovery.<sup>8</sup>

Despite overtly unilateral actions by the West, the Yeltsin era witnessed an unprecedented number of Russian concessions including; ending military aid to the communist regime in Afghanistan, removing combat troops from Cuba, committing to democratic reform, agreeing to the Strategic Arms Reduction (START) II treaty which would have eliminated

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<sup>5</sup> Stuart D. Goldman, "Russian Political, Economic and Security Issues and US Interest", CRS Report to Congress, 31 May 2007, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Eugene B. Rumer, *Russian Foreign Policy Beyond Putin* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), 14-18.

<sup>7</sup> Yuliya Tymoshenko, "Containing Russia," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 3 (May/June 2007): 69.

<sup>8</sup> Dimitri K. Simes, "Losing Russia; the Costs of Renewed Confrontation," *Foreign Affairs* 86, no. 6 (Nov/Dec 2007): 36-37.

Multiple Independently Targetable Reentry Vehicle Inter-Continental Ballistic Missiles (the backbone of Russia's Strategic Rocket Forces), and accepting NATO in the Czech Republic, Hungary and Poland. These national security concessions by Yeltsin and his foreign minister came to be strongly criticized by Russian hard liners and moderates alike. Yeltsin's appointment of Yevgeny Primokov in 1995 to replace Kozyrev as foreign minister ushered in a less cooperative era in which Russia's foreign policy became decidedly less pro-Western, contested NATO expansion, sought increased control over former Soviet republics, and looked eastward for cooperation with China and India to counter "US hegemony".<sup>9</sup> As a result, Russia now participates in numerous regional organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Council and Asian-Pacific Economic Cooperation and is an observer in the Organization of Islamic States.<sup>10</sup>

## **THE PUTIN ERA**

Coming to power in 2000, Vladimir Putin's presidency coincided with a new era of Russian prosperity and, hence, a shift in the Western dominated balance that characterized the 1990s. Russia's economy not only recovered from the catastrophic collapse of 1998, it has flourished with a steady growth in GDP. Due in large measure to a surge in the world price for oil and natural gas, Russia's vast natural resources have facilitated her economic growth. Russia is the only country in the world with more natural resources than the United States, including vast oil and gas reserves. It is the world's second largest producer and exporter of oil (after Saudi Arabia) and the world's largest producer and exporter of natural gas.<sup>11</sup> Capitalizing on

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<sup>9</sup> Stuart D. Goldman, "Russian Political, Economic and Security Issues and US Interest", CRS Report to Congress, 31 May 2007, 15.

<sup>10</sup> Ingmar Oldberg, "Great Power Ambitions Under Putin," in *Russia: Re-Emerging Great Power*, ed. Roger E. Kanet (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 19.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 6.

these resources during the past decade, GDP has grown from \$120 billion to \$1.2 trillion. Russia has built a foreign currency reserve of over \$400 billion completely reversing its economic dependency of the 1990s marked by \$22 billion in debt to creditor nations. Additionally, current Russian federal budget policies drive a surplus of approximately 9 per cent of GDP annually.<sup>12</sup>

In a 2008 article in *Demokratizatsiya*, Anders Aslund attributes Russia's economic recovery as much to luck and the reforms begun during the Yeltsin era as he does to Putin policies. He cites three fundamental conditions that have enabled Russia to sustain steady economic growth. First, Russia has successfully established a normal market economy based on private enterprise reforms begun in the 1990s. Second, the lessons of the 1998 financial crash have served to ensure Russia will maintain strict macroeconomic controls and conservatively budget for a GDP surplus to serve as a financial safety net. Finally, under Putin's leadership, Russia has developed a single-minded focus on economic growth similar to that of neighboring countries in Asia, most notably India and China.<sup>13</sup>

Coincident with the growth of Russia's economic prosperity has been increasing great power rhetoric which has characterized both Putin's terms as president and his position as prime minister. Ingmar Oldberg addresses this in his article, *Great Power Ambitions Under Putin*, in which he points to Putin's clear understanding that great power status is no longer limited to those countries possessing military capabilities. Rather, it is coming to rest more squarely in technology development and increased living standards.<sup>14</sup> Putin fostered an increase in nationalism and worked to combat the malaise of the 1990's in which Russia went from a society

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<sup>12</sup> Rumer, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 55.

<sup>13</sup> Anders Aslund, "Putin's Lurch Toward Tsarism and Neoimperialism: Why the United States Should Care," *Demokratizatsiya* 16, no. 1 (Winter 2008): 20.

<sup>14</sup> Oldberg, "Great Power Ambitions Under Putin," 14.

overwhelmingly dependent on a single ideology to society with no ideology at all. Putin gave Russians back their identity. Oldberg illustrates this point by highlighting a 2003 speech to the General Assembly in which Putin states, “Russia will firmly take its place among the truly strong, economically advanced and influential states of the world.”<sup>15</sup>

## MOVEMENT BACK TO AUTOCRACY

But, while Russia’s economic and diplomatic recovery is impressive, critics argue Putin’s tight controls in the name of transformation merely mask his real autocratic intentions. Since 2000, the West has watched Putin curb Russia’s democratic reforms. With Putin’s protégé, Dmitry Medvedev in place as Russia’s president and with Putin himself in position as the prime minister, challenges to democracy are likely to continue. Despite his near 80 per cent approval rating, Michael McFaul and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss argue in *Foreign Affairs* that Putin should not be credited with Russia’s economic turn-around. On the contrary, they suggest Russia’s successes occurred despite rather than because of Putin’s actions. Putin’s presidency has chartered a course for autocratic control over the media, the government, and the free market economy, especially the energy sector. Today the Kremlin has regained control of all the major national television networks as well as print media. And, Russia now ranks as the third most dangerous place in the world for journalists as witnessed by the murder of Anna Politkovskaya, an outspoken investigative journalist, in 2006.<sup>16</sup>

Additionally, Putin effectively ended regional elections in 2004 with his announcement that he would appoint all governors (ostensibly to make them more accountable and effective)

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 15.

<sup>16</sup> Michael McFaul and Kathryn Stoner-Weiss, “The Myth of the Authoritarian Model: How Putin’s Crackdown Holds Russia Back”, *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 1 (Jan/Feb 2008): 72-73.

making regional governors wholly dependent on, and subservient to, the president. He also enacted policy to ensure all Duma deputies are elected on the basis of national party lists effectively eliminating deputies and further strengthening the pro-presidential parties that already controlled an absolute majority in the Duma. This blow to Russian federalism along with the continued decay of Russia's parliamentary prerogatives has served to shore up Putin's autonomy.<sup>17</sup>

Further consolidating his grip over all aspects of power and authority, Putin started a massive renationalization of Russia's largest corporations. The Kremlin now controls, either through direct ownership or installation of Putin cronies, the majority of Russia's oil and natural gas production. Replacing Yeltsin era oligarchs with loyal former KGB colleagues, Putin has in effect curtailed the possibility of political opposition from the richest and most powerful sectors of Russian society. The most egregious example of this is the arrest, seizure of capital and imprisonment of Yukos Oil owner Mikhail Khodorkovsky on corruption charges.<sup>18</sup> By placing Russia's wealthiest man and active political opponent in prison, Putin sent a strong message to other businessmen about the dangers of opposition politics.

## **RENEWED EAST-WEST TENSIONS**

During Putin's first term as president, US-Russian relations were characterized as relatively cooperative. Putin viewed Russia's economic revitalizations and integration into the global economic system dominated by advanced industrial democracies as his top priority. Political and military confrontation with the West and, especially the United States, was seen as counter-productive. Most notably, following the terrorist attacks of 9-11, Putin became a

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<sup>17</sup> McFaul and Stoner-Weiss, "The Myth of the Authoritarian Model," 69-71.

staunch US ally on the war on terror even supporting the US interest in basing rights in the former Soviet republic of Kazakhstan. Putin undoubtedly equated Russia's long-running battle against Islamic fundamentalism stemming from the war in Chechnya to the Bush administration's war against the Taliban and Al Qaeda and saw Russia as a natural partner.<sup>19</sup>

But, Putin's shift toward autocracy and hard-line policies has resulted in frequent challenges from the West to Putin's domestic record and questions about his true intentions for continued democratic transition. In an article entitled *Forming a New Security Identity under Vladimir Putin*, Nikita Lomagin suggests Putin's desire to seek increasing roles for Russia in international organizations like the G-8, while simultaneously moving toward autocracy and away from free-market capitalism and democratic reform, represents a significant dichotomy and has emboldened his critics.<sup>20</sup> In fact, a 2007 *Foreign Affairs* article by Presidential candidate John McCain questions Russia's movement away from democracy suggesting the G-8 "become again a club of leading market democracies...[to] include Brazil and India but exclude Russia."<sup>21</sup>

In response, Putin has countered with appeals to Russian sovereignty, dignity and self-respect as witnessed in his February 2007 speech to the Munich Conference on Security Policy in which he stated, "...we are constantly being taught about democracy. But for some reason those who teach us do not want to learn themselves."<sup>22</sup> His speech cited the US invasion of Iraq, NATO expansion, and the Ballistic Missile Defense proposal as examples of unacceptable US

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<sup>18</sup> Tymoshenko, "Containing Russia," 71.

<sup>19</sup> Goldman, "Russian Political, Economic and Security Issues", CRS Report, 15.

<sup>20</sup> Nikita A. Lomagin, "Forming a New Security Identity," in *Russia: Re-Emerging Great Power*, ed. Roger E. Kanet (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 45.

<sup>21</sup> John McCain, "An Enduring Peace Built on Freedom: Securing America's Future," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 86, No. 6, November/December 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Vladimir Putin, (speech to the Munich Conference on Security Policy, 10 February 2007).

unilateralism. Putin has been quoted multiple times as stating Russia will move down the path of democracy in its own way and in its own time. But, Western suspicions run deep. According to Aslund,

For eight years, Putin has talked about the reinforcement of democracy, and even after having abolished every bit of it, he cannot stop talking about his democratic ambitions. Apparently, Putin uses public statements as disinformation. He has restored the Soviet tradition of “newspeak”, calling everything opposite, as George Orwell described in his novel *1984*.<sup>23</sup>

## **NATO EXPANSION, KOSOVO, AND GEORGIA**

The first wave of NATO expansion into Eastern Europe in the mid-1990's was met with considerable Russian restraint. The accession of Poland, Hungary, and the Czech Republic was seen by most Russians as a natural consequence of the end of the Cold War. And, although it struck at the very center of Russian regional hegemony, it was not viewed as particularly threatening. With the 1999 NATO war against Serbia despite Russian objections and without UN Security Council approval, Russia's perception of the NATO threat in the form of eastward expansion changed.<sup>24</sup> Today US – Russian interests conflict more directly over the issue of NATO expansion in the post-Soviet arena. Russia is adamantly opposed to NATO membership for the Ukraine, Georgia, and Azerbaijan. Despite original support for the US war on terror to include basing rights in Central Asia, Russia now ardently supports the Uzbekistan decision to remove US forces from their country and is interested in a complete withdrawal of US presence in Central Asia altogether.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Aslund, “Putin's Lurch,” 19.

<sup>24</sup> Simes, “Losing Russia,” 38.

<sup>25</sup> Dmitri Trenin, “Russia Redefines Itself and Its Relations with the West,” *The Washington Quarterly*, 30, no. 2 (Spring 2007): 101.

Putin's second term, therefore, can be characterized by a cooling of US – Russian relations. A central issue is the status of Kosovo's independence from Serbia. The US, NATO and EU all support an independent Kosovo. Still stinging from NATO's decision to attack Serbia against their objections, Russia adamantly opposes Kosovo's independence and backs Belgrade's efforts to retain the region.<sup>26</sup> Ethnically Slav, Serbia is historically in the Russian sphere of influence and the two countries have a long diplomatic history. Russian leaders have gone as far as to use the Kosovo question as a political hedge drawing comparisons between Kosovo's bid for independence and the status of ethnically Russian enclaves in former Soviet countries. Russia argues Kosovo represents a precedent for promoting secessionist movements in Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Transdniestria.<sup>27</sup>

But, presumably the most important East-West tension from the Russian point of view is their adamant opposition to NATO expansion into Georgia and the Ukraine. Russia has been clear they will not tolerate Western influence on their doorstep and actively opposed the “color revolutions” or pro-democracy movements in Georgia in 2003 and the Ukraine in 2005.<sup>28</sup> Both Georgia and the Ukraine have lobbied hard for membership in NATO and Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili has been openly confrontational with Russia in his bid for NATO membership and in his efforts to secure control over Georgia's break-away regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>29</sup> The conflict came to a boil this past August when Russian forces entered

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<sup>26</sup> Goldman, “Russian Political, Economic and Security Interests,” 15.

<sup>27</sup> Susanne Nies, “Governance and Diplomacy as Attributes of a Great Power; Russia and the Three Enclaves – Kaliningrad, Nagorno-Karabakh and Nakhchivan,” in *Russia: Re-Emerging Great Power*, ed. Roger E. Kanet (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 136-138.

<sup>28</sup> Rumer, *Russian Foreign Policy*, 25.

<sup>29</sup> Bertil Nygren, “Attempts to Subjugate Georgia: From Sabre-Rattling to the Power of the Purse,” in *Russia: Re-Emerging Great Power*, ed. Roger E. Kanet (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 108-109.

South Ossetia ostensibly to protect ethnic Russian's from Georgian attacks. Although questions remain regarding which side initiated hostilities, Russia's invasion of Georgian territory "sparked the biggest crisis in East – West relations since the Cold War" according to the BBC's Tim Whewell. In response, the US, Britain and other West European nations accused Russia of military aggression and offered Georgia strong diplomatic support.<sup>30</sup>

But, the distinction between strong diplomatic support and full membership into NATO cannot be overstated. Russia's incursion into Georgia may, in fact, have been a well calculated move to force the West to rethink the wisdom of pushing NATO to Russia's borders. Regardless of Georgia's status as a nation undergoing democratic transformation and demonstrating strong interest in becoming a viable member of NATO, Russia's occupation of South Ossetia highlights the fact the United States and NATO would be neither able nor willing to invoke Article 5 (the collective security clause) of the charter in Georgia's defense.

## **THE IRAN PROBLEM**

Another point of contention in which the US and Russia have been unable to come to meaningful agreement is Russia's sale of material and technical expertise to aid Iran's quest for nuclear technology. The IAEA recently warned that Tehran has significantly increased its efforts to produce nuclear fuel while failing to address suspicions over its attempts to develop nuclear warheads. As signatories to the nuclear counter-proliferation treaty, the US and Russia recently agreed to a UN Security Council resolution condemning Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons technology. However, Russia refused to apply economic sanctions citing a lack of urgency.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Tim Whewell, "What Really Happened in South Ossetia?" *BBC News*, 12 November 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/newsnight/7722806.stm>.

<sup>31</sup> Jay Solomon, "US, Russia Agree to Criticize Iran," *The Wall Street Journal*, 27 September 2008.

Russia is heavily involved with Iran's nuclear program having agreed to provide Russian uranium and technology for Iran's Bushehr reactor. Russia's relationship with Iran has become its closest and most important in the Middle East. Shifting its support toward Iran in the Iran-Iraq war and beginning long term arms sales, Russia has developed close trade relations with Iran reaching as high as \$2 billion per year in 2005. This combined with Russia's sale of the Bushehr nuclear power plant and a shared desire to counter US hegemony in the region gives the Russia – Iran relationship a special status. According to an article in the *Current Digest of the Post Soviet Press*, Russia has an added incentive for maintaining good relations:

Cooperation with Iran is more than just a question of money and orders for the Russian atomic industry. Today a hostile Tehran could cause a great deal of unpleasantness for Russia in the North Caucasus and in Tajikistan if it were really to set its mind to supporting the Muslim insurgents with weapons, money and volunteers. On the other hand, a friendly Iran could become an important strategic ally in the future.<sup>32</sup>

Therefore, despite clear US counter-proliferation goals and interest in keeping Iran out of the club of nuclear powers, Russian concern over a nuclear Iran is secondary to more fundamental interests. Specifically, efforts to earn hard currency, re-invigorate its technology sector, and provide an issue by which to demonstrate policy independence from the United States will likely keep the nuclear question alive for some time to come.

## **US ABM PROPOSAL**

The recent US proposal to establish a Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) system in Eastern Europe has become the source of another dispute threatening US relations with Russia. The US recently signed an agreement with Poland to install missiles at a base on the Baltic Sea. This follows a similar agreement with the Czech Republic to build radar systems for what the US

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<sup>32</sup> Robert O. Freedman, "Russia, Iran and the Nuclear Question: The Putin Record," in *Russia: Re-Emerging Great Power*, ed. Roger E. Kanet (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 199.

envisions as a world-wide BMD system and comes in direct response to Iran's testing of a ballistic missile with the capability of reaching South-Eastern Europe.<sup>33</sup>

Exacerbating this already tense situation is the US unilateral withdrawal from the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) treaty in 2001 and signals from the Bush administration the US has no plans to extend the START I treaty beyond its 2009 expiration.<sup>34</sup> Russia has been opposed to the BMD proposal citing an increased threat to Russian security and has even countered with a suggestion of a cooperative BMD system using Russian radars sites as an alternative. Unable to find middle ground, Putin has linked the Conventional Forces Europe (CFE) and ABM treaties and has threatened to pull Russia from the CFE treaty. The Kremlin had previously expressed frustration over the NATO – US failure to ratify amendments to CFE and the West has remained intransigent on this issue in light of Russia's non-compliance on troop and equipment withdrawal from the Caucasus "flank" region (most notably Moldova).<sup>35</sup> This issue highlights the growing level of US – Russian tensions. Case in point, in a 5 November 2008 annual speech to parliament, President Medvedev announced his intentions to move Russian tactical missiles into the Kaliningrad enclave in the Baltic region to "neutralize" US interceptor missiles.<sup>36</sup>

This rhetoric reminiscent of the Cold War is not only unfortunate, it represents the current negative trend in US – Russian relations and is, for the most part, avoidable. In light of Russian concerns over a build-up of US weapons systems in Eastern Europe, regardless that they

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<sup>33</sup> "Q&A: US Missile Defense," *BBC News*, 20 August 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/6720153.stm>.

<sup>34</sup> Richard Sakwa, "'New Cold War' or Twenty Years' Crisis? Russia and International Politics," *International Affairs*, 84, no. 2 (2008): 255.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Finn, "Putin Withdraws Russia from Major Arms Treaty," *The Washington Post*, 1 December 2007, A-8.

<sup>36</sup> "Iksander-M Tactical Missiles in Kaliningrad," Russian-danger Blogspot, <http://russiandanger.blogspot.com/2008/11/iskander-m-tactical-missiles-in.html>.

are defensive in nature and considering Moscow's efforts to cooperate in a joint BMD project, US motives become questionable. If the real concern is the possibility of a conventional or nuclear attack on South-Eastern Europe, why not allow Russia to take a leading role in countering the threat. Rather, it would appear the US is more interested in building ties with the two new NATO countries and further projecting power (in this case militarily) in Eastern Europe.

## **NATO'S UNCERTAIN FUTURE**

NATO has undoubtedly worked hard to guarantee its relevance as an organization in the post-Cold War era. Since the early 1990's, NATO has come under increasing scrutiny and continual debate regarding its size, scope, mission and ultimate viability. NATO's questionable performance in the 1999 Kosovo campaign has enhanced suggestions by critics that NATO has become irrelevant in Europe's collective security. In response to the Soviet demise and in light of this criticism, NATO has shifted its weight of effort from mutual defense of Western Europe to conflict management, democratization, crisis response and institutional enlargement.<sup>37</sup> NATO's current contribution in Afghanistan in the war against Al Qaida and the Taliban exemplifies this significant shift in NATO's role. Furthermore, the 1995 study for NATO enlargement established entrance criteria for new nations which are far more governance related than defense related. Specifically, they include conformance to the principles of democracy, individual liberty and the rule of law; commitment to Organization for Security and Cooperation

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<sup>37</sup> NATO Basic Texts, *Study on NATO Enlargement*, updated 5 October 2000, <http://www.nato.int/docu/basictxt/enl-9506.htm>

in Europe (OSCE) norms and principles; promotion of stability, economic security, social justice and environmental responsibility; and establishment of civilian control over defense forces.<sup>38</sup>

NATO has attempted to develop a new relationship of cooperation and trust with Russia. Starting with Russia's membership in the Partnership for Peace in 1994 and with Russia as a founding member of the North Atlantic Cooperation Council in 1991, Russia initially appeared unlikely to oppose NATO's enlargement. But, the incorporation of the Baltic States along with membership for Bulgaria, Romania, Slovakia and Slovenia brought the threat of NATO enlargement to Russia's doorstep and NATO – Russian cooperative efforts have all but ceased.<sup>39</sup> The Ukraine, Georgia and Azerbaijan appear to be beyond NATO's current grasp. This may actually prove beneficial in checking NATO's "over-reaching." Perhaps NATO should not be the pseudo-military arm of the European Union becoming synonymous with democratization efforts. Rather than completely losing its focus on external threats in the wake of the Soviet collapse, NATO should once again become a threat based collective security organization with its mission focused on emerging threats. Regional ethnic and religious conflicts along with radical militant ideology have become a real and growing threat to European security and NATO would do well to address these threats.

## **CONCLUSION: US POLICY VIS-À-VIS NATO AND RUSSIA**

Perhaps the appropriate strategy for the United States is a balanced approach between the two opposing camps; one suggesting we abandon NATO and the other supporting NATO expansion. Rather, now may be a suitable time to curb NATO's eastward movement and re-

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid

<sup>39</sup> Margarita Assenova, "The Debate on NATO's Evolution: A Guide," *A Report of the CSIS Eastern Europe Project*, April 2003, 44.

align its mission more closely with its original charter while at the same time reducing direct US involvement with military and financial support. The era of US unilateralism and NATO expansion unchecked by any regionally powerful counterforce is over. As Russian economic, political and military influence has grown, so has the risk stemming from overly aggressive US policies in Russia's sphere of influence.

The greatest risk the US runs with respect to Russia is not the creation of a 21<sup>st</sup> century Cold War. This would imply a return to bi-polar international competition based on an ideological rivalry. World-wide conditions have changed such that this would be nearly impossible. Rather, the risk is in allowing geopolitical differences to strain relations to the point they become politically irreconcilable. There is little doubt the actions of WWI's victors' humiliated and marginalized Germany which in the subsequent custody of Adolph Hitler's ultra-nationalist totalitarianism ultimately led to the greatest conventional war in history.<sup>40</sup> It would be prudent to note recent Russian words and actions indicate they're not going to idly sit by while the US and NATO act against their perceived geo-political interests.

In the final analysis, the implications of a resurgent Russia boil down to its effects on US vital national interest. Undoubtedly, Russia is nowhere near as central to US interests as was the Soviet Union during the Cold War. With the dismantling of the former USSR and reduction of the Soviet war machine, Russia no longer possesses the same ability to project its power. However, Russia's domestic developments and regional actions are still important to the US. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council and the second largest nuclear power in the world, Russia cannot and should not be marginalized; especially on issues concerning its

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<sup>40</sup> Sakwa, "New Cold War," 265-266.

perceived sphere of influence. Additionally, despite significant challenges to economic growth and domestic reform, it remains a fact that Russia is solidifying its future as a world economic power. Russia will continue to play a growing role in determining the security environment in Europe, Asia and the Middle East vis-à-vis arms control, nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction and the war against radical Islam.

For these reasons, it's imperative that US foreign policy actively seek common ground with Russia in areas of mutual interest. Such wide ranging issues as NATO's mission and expansion east, Kosovo, the war on militant Islam, energy and pipeline policies, WMD and ballistic missile defense all require a concerted effort to solicit, understand, and incorporate Russia's interests in as much as they can be reconciled with United States vital national interests. This is not to suggest, however, the US abandon its objectives in favor of national conciliation with Russia. The threat from the former Soviet Union was very real and the US fought a long and expensive war to defeat that threat primarily through its leading role in NATO. Russia's re-emerging hard and soft power, growing economy, rising nationalism, and increasing great power rhetoric should remain a vital concern for the United States and its policy should strike a more balanced tone looking at long range strategic objectives for Russia, NATO and Europe.

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